Submission, Resistance, and Divine Order: Why Leaders Rarely Understand Both Shi'a Islamic and Christian Moral Theology – and What Trump's Iran Strikes Reveal

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This paper explores one of the most overlooked causes of international misunderstanding and conflict: the widespread failure of political and diplomatic leaders to grasp the theological frameworks that shape Shi'a Islam and Christianity. At the heart of Shi'a moral thought lies Imam Hussain's refusal to accept humiliation at Karbala—a call to resist tyranny in all its forms. In contrast, Christian moral theology elevates the voluntary submission of Jesus Christ as the highest expression of love and redemption. These contrasting visions—resistance as virtue versus submission as sanctity—inform deeply divergent understandings of justice, peace, and political legitimacy. Despite the enduring influence of both traditions, global decision-makers often act without even basic awareness of these sacred moral universes. The result is a cascade of policy failures, from the Iranian Revolution to the 2025 U.S. bombing of Iran's nuclear facilities. This paper traces the history of this ignorance, highlights rare figures who bridged the theological divide, and calls for a new model of morally literate leadership—one capable of engaging not just interests, but the sacred convictions that drive civilizations.

Keywords: Shi'a Islam, Christianity, Imam Hussain, Jesus Christ, Karbala, submission, resistance, martyrdom, moral theology, diplomacy, political theology, theological illiteracy, Iran, U.S. foreign policy, Operation Midnight Hammer, Ayatollah Khomeini, Henry Corbin, Louis Massignon, Ayatollah Motahhari, global leadership, moral literacy, religious studies, interfaith ethics, just war, peacebuilding, theological misunderstanding, religious politics, martyrdom theology, diplomacy and religion. A collaboration with GPT-4o. CC4.0.

Abstract

This paper explores the profound theological divergence between Shi'a Islam and Christianity in their respective conceptions of submission, resistance, law, justice, and peace. Central to the Shi'a worldview is the figure of Imam Hussain, whose refusal to submit to the Umayyad Caliphate at Karbala symbolizes sacred resistance against tyranny and humiliation. In contrast, Christianity centers on the figure of Jesus Christ, whose willing submission to torture and death on the cross embodies an ethic of redemptive suffering and divine forgiveness. These two traditions present not merely differing moral codes, but fundamentally distinct cosmologies of what it means to stand before God, power, and injustice.

Despite their global importance, few modern political or religious leaders possess a working fluency in both systems. This deficit has led to catastrophic misunderstandings, especially in foreign policy and conflict mediation. The paper surveys historical figures who did engage deeply with both traditions, alongside leaders who failed to do so and whose decisions suffered as a result. We conclude with an in-depth case study of the Trump administration's 2025 bombing campaign against Iranian nuclear facilities. Rather than emerging from a moral or theological calculus, the operation was driven by geopolitical allegiance to Israel and domestic posturing, absent any serious consideration of the Shi'a moral worldview. The result was a deepening of mistrust, moral injury, and strategic failure—a vivid example of how theological ignorance can have violent geopolitical consequences.

1. Introduction

The modern world is shaped not only by economics and power, but by moral visions that define what is honorable, just, and sacred. Among the most powerful of these are the moral frameworks embedded in Shi'a Islam and Christianity. These two traditions—each with billions of adherents or cultural inheritors—differ profoundly in how they understand the relationship between the self, power, and

the divine. These differences are not merely doctrinal; they shape politics, resistance movements, international relations, and the logic of war and peace. Yet these foundational differences are rarely understood—least of all by those with the power to declare war, negotiate peace, or lead nations.

1.1. Two Moral Universes: Submission vs. Resistance

At the core of Shi'a Islam is the story of Imam Hussain, who refused to submit to the rule of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid, even at the cost of his life. His stand at Karbala in 680 CE is not remembered as a military defeat, but as the highest expression of moral resistance to tyranny. His cry—*"Hayhāt minnā al-dhillah"* ("Far be it from us to accept humiliation")—echoes through Shi'a history as a declaration that submission to unjust power is worse than death.

In stark contrast, Christianity venerates the voluntary submission of Jesus to Roman execution as the ultimate moral triumph. Christ's refusal to resist, his forgiveness of enemies, and his acceptance of the cross are seen not as weakness, but as the definitive model of divine love. This contrast creates two moral universes: one in which resistance is the highest form of piety, and another in which submission becomes the path to redemption.

Understanding this divergence is not an exercise in abstraction—it has concrete geopolitical implications, especially in regions like the Middle East where the legacy of Karbala remains politically potent, and where Western actions are often filtered through a Christian moral lens (or a secularized version of it). Without understanding the difference between Hussain's resistance and Christ's submission, leaders are left interpreting martyrdom, protest, and war through culturally inappropriate frameworks.

1.2. From "Law, Justice, Peace" to Theological Misunderstanding

A Muslim friend once summarized the structure of Islamic moral thought as "Law, Justice, Peace." This elegant formulation reflects the Shi'a belief that divine law (Sharia) exists to produce justice, and justice is the prerequisite for lasting peace. In this view, peace without justice is a fraud—an imposed quietude that masks

oppression. Theological legitimacy flows from God's law through moral resistance, not through political stability or compromise.

Contrast this with many Christian traditions, where peace is a gift of grace, not the product of law. Justice is fulfilled not through resistance or legal restoration, but through Christ's atoning sacrifice, and moral victory often lies in the refusal to retaliate. These differences go far beyond semantics—they affect how states interpret civil unrest, foreign defiance, and even nuclear threats. When one tradition sees submission to injustice as blasphemy and the other sees it as sanctity, the potential for mutual misunderstanding becomes inevitable—unless carefully addressed.

1.3. Scope and Stakes of Comparative Moral Theology

This paper attempts to do what few political analyses dare: to treat moral theology as real, consequential, and operative. It compares the Shi'a and Christian paradigms not to declare one superior, but to map their internal logics, especially around submission, resistance, law, justice, and peace. Along the way, it asks why so few leaders—religious or secular—understand both traditions well enough to engage them meaningfully. We highlight rare figures who bridged the divide, and examine the consequences when others failed to do so.

The paper culminates in a case study of the Trump administration's 2025 bombing of Iranian nuclear installations, which demonstrates how religious illiteracy, combined with geopolitical allegiance, can produce outcomes that are morally reckless and strategically short-sighted. In a world where religion is not fading but resurging, understanding these competing moral frameworks is no longer optional. It is a strategic and ethical necessity.

2. Shi'a Moral Theology: Resistance, Honor, and Divine Law

Shi'a Islam is not merely a theological school within Islam; it is a moral and historical tradition forged in the crucible of injustice and defiance. Its ethical core is built around a theology of resistance, where standing against oppression is not optional—it is sacred. This orientation is expressed most vividly in the event of

Karbala, where Hussain ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, chose martyrdom over compromise. In contrast to Sunni Islam's traditional deference to political order for the sake of communal stability, Shi'a Islam emerged as the religion of those who were betrayed by the caliphate and denied worldly justice. As a result, Shi'a moral theology does not emphasize institutional continuity—it emphasizes the cosmic significance of principled refusal.

2.1. Karbala as Foundational Mythos

The Battle of Karbala in 680 CE is not merely a historical memory for Shi'a Muslims—it is a mythic frame that shapes all ethical and political thinking. When Hussain and his small band of followers were encircled by the much larger army of the Umayyad caliph Yazid, they faced a choice: submit to illegitimate authority or die with honor. Hussain chose death, declaring that "death with dignity is better than life with humiliation."

This event is re-enacted and reinterpreted every year during Ashura, when millions of Shi'a mourners process through streets in grief and solidarity. Yet this mourning is not passive—it is a moral activation ritual, calling each believer to ask: *"Where is Yazid today, and where is Hussain? Which side am I on?"* Karbala is not about the past—it is a living paradigm for how to navigate injustice today. It frames opposition to tyranny as divine obedience, and suffering for truth as a higher form of victory.

2.2. "Hayhāt minnā al-dhillah": Dignity Through Non-Submission

At the heart of Hussain's stand is the iconic phrase: "Hayhāt minnā al-dhillah" — *"Far be it from us to accept humiliation."* This is more than rhetoric. It is a doctrinal assertion that submission to unjust power constitutes a moral sin. In the Shi'a worldview, to accept humiliation at the hands of the oppressor is to participate in the oppressor's sin. Dignity (*karāma*) is not found in survival, but in refusal.

This contrasts sharply with Christian traditions in which submission to humiliation can be holy—as seen in Christ's willing crucifixion. In Shi'a thought, however, God is best served through moral resistance, even if it costs everything. This ethos

feeds directly into Shi'a political discourse: legitimacy is not inherited—it is earned by moral action. Religious authority derives not from position but from proximity to divine truth, even when that truth is politically inconvenient.

2.3. The Triad: Law → Justice → Peace

One of the most elegant expressions of Shi'a theology comes in the phrase: "Law, Justice, Peace." This sequence encapsulates the moral logic of the tradition:

- Law (Sharia) is the revealed path from God. It is not merely ritualistic; it encompasses the moral, legal, social, and spiritual dimensions of life.
- Justice ('Adl) is the outcome Sharia intends. A legal system that does not produce justice is either being misapplied or deliberately corrupted.
- Peace (Salaam) is not the absence of conflict, but the result of justice being made real.

In Shi'a theology, therefore, peace without justice is illegitimate, and justice without divine law is unstable. This stands in contrast to many Christian formulations where peace may be seen as a graceful gift, even amid injustice. In the Shi'a framework, justice must precede peace—and where there is no justice, resistance is not just permitted; it is obligatory.

2.4. Political Martyrdom, Revolution, and Shi'a Identity

This theology of resistance is not confined to personal ethics—it has shaped the political identity of Shi'a communities throughout history. From the Safavids to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, from Lebanese Hizbullah to the Houthi movement in Yemen, the legacy of Karbala animates a vision of political struggle where martyrdom is not defeat but triumph.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution, for example, was steeped in Karbala imagery. Ayatollah Khomeini presented the Shah as a modern-day Yazid, and positioned himself as reviving the spirit of Hussain. Political revolution was not a break from religion—it was its fulfillment. Even today, Iranian leaders frequently invoke Hussain and the moral necessity of resisting humiliation—especially in the face of Western pressure and Israeli aggression.

In this worldview, the martyr is not a suicide bomber or a nihilist. The martyr is a moral exemplar, one who accepts death not to destroy others but to affirm divine justice. This distinguishes Shi'a martyrdom from many Western caricatures and reveals a deeply moral theology that views self-sacrifice as a sacred form of political action.

Shi'a moral theology, then, is a theology of conscience over comfort, of honor over survival, of divine law over worldly success. It challenges those who wield power to ask: *By what moral standard do you rule?* And it challenges those who are oppressed: *What is your duty when faced with injustice?* It is this theology—rich, defiant, and often misunderstood—that must be reckoned with in any serious engagement with the Shi'a world.

3. Christian Moral Theology: Submission, Grace, and Redemptive Suffering

Whereas Shi'a moral theology centers on *resistance* as the highest form of spiritual dignity, Christianity—particularly in its foundational texts—centers on *submission* as the gateway to divine grace. The person of Jesus Christ, and especially the narrative of His crucifixion, provides Christianity with an ethic that prizes humility, forgiveness, and sacrificial love over retribution or even justice in the worldly sense. The moral arc of Christianity does not seek justice first, but transformation through grace, and it often treats suffering not as something to resist but as something that can be redemptive. This marks a radical difference in the moral foundations between the two traditions, especially when translated into political and social ethics.

3.1. The Passion Narrative and the Value of Humility

At the heart of Christian theology is the Passion narrative—the arrest, trial, crucifixion, and death of Jesus. Unlike Imam Hussain, who drew a moral line and refused to submit to a corrupt ruler, Jesus voluntarily submits to arrest and execution by an unjust regime. He does not rally troops or call down angelic armies. He tells Peter to put away his sword (John 18:11). He allows Judas to

betray him, the Sanhedrin to slander him, and Pilate to condemn him, even though he is innocent.

The theological interpretation of this act—especially in the writings of Paul and the Church Fathers—is that humility is not weakness but divine strength. As Philippians 2:6–8 says of Christ:

"Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself… he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."

This "emptying" (*kenosis*) becomes the central virtue of Christian discipleship. The Christian is not called to assert dignity through resistance, but to *mirror Christ's humility*, trusting that God exalts the humble and brings low the proud.

3.2. Peace via the Cross, Not Legalistic Justice

In Shi'a Islam, peace is the result of law and justice being fulfilled on earth. In Christianity, however, peace is won through the cross, not through political or legal resolution. The crucifixion of Jesus is seen as the culmination of justice and mercy, a paradox in which God absorbs human injustice and offers reconciliation without retaliation.

Paul writes in Romans 5:1:

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

This peace is not a legal peace in the worldly sense; it does not mean that the world has become just. Rather, it is spiritual peace, established through grace, which allows the believer to endure injustice without hatred, to forgive rather than avenge, and to rest in divine sovereignty rather than seek vindication through human systems.

This doctrine has radical implications for Christian moral action. It tends to discourage rebellion, valorize martyrdom, and emphasize inner transformation over outer revolt. Where Shi'a Islam might say, "Rise up, like Hussain," Christianity often says, "Pick up your cross and follow me."

3.3. Political Quietism: Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) is often considered the ethical heart of Jesus' teachings. It is here that Jesus delivers his most striking commands:

- *"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."*
- *"Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you."*
- *"If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."*

These are not tactical strategies for political liberation; they are a countercultural ethic rooted in trust in God rather than confidence in worldly justice. Jesus does not offer a political theology of resistance. He offers a theology of inward purity, mercy, and trust. As he says in John 18:36:

"My kingdom is not of this world."

This ethos has historically led many Christians to adopt political quietism—a tendency to submit to rulers, even unjust ones, so long as one's conscience is not directly violated. From the early martyrs of the Roman Empire to Anabaptist nonresistance to modern Christian pacifists, many Christian communities have understood political power as corrupted by sin and not to be relied upon or seized for redemptive purposes.

3.4. Law Fulfilled, Not Enforced

In Christian theology, particularly that of Paul, the Mosaic law is seen as a tutor—a preparation for the arrival of Christ, who fulfills the law through his life, death, and resurrection. As Paul writes in Romans 10:4:

"Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."

This does not mean that law is discarded, but that its purpose is now internalized through grace. Where Shi'a Islam insists that divine law must govern society to produce justice, Christianity often internalizes law as a matter of the heart, made alive by the Holy Spirit. In Galatians 5:18, Paul writes:

"If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law."

This shift from external enforcement to internal transformation means that Christian ethics often prioritizes personal sanctity over systemic order. It also means that forgiveness trumps vengeance, mercy transcends retribution, and grace replaces tit-for-tat moral logic.

In sum, Christian moral theology is a path of descent: it calls the believer downward into humility, surrender, and grace. It is profoundly anti-triumphal, wary of worldly power, and convinced that the true revolution is not political but spiritual. While it has been distorted at times by empire and conquest, its foundational texts offer a vision of moral life that is radically vulnerable—a vision that can be easily misunderstood by traditions that prize visible justice and honor over hidden grace.

4. Why So Few Understand Both Traditions

Despite the global influence of both Christianity and Shi'a Islam, very few individuals—particularly among political leaders, diplomats, and even religious scholars—possess a meaningful understanding of both moral traditions. This absence of theological literacy across traditions has left a vacuum in policymaking, conflict resolution, and intercultural dialogue. The result is a world where deep theological convictions are often flattened into geopolitical slogans, where martyrdom is mistaken for fanaticism, and where resistance is misread as terrorism or insubordination. Understanding why so few grasp the full moral logic of both traditions requires a look at history, knowledge systems, institutional blind spots, and the enduring dominance of majority narratives.

4.1. Historical Estrangement: Crusades, Empire, Sectarian Conflict

The rift between the Christian and Muslim worlds has been marked by centuries of conflict, mutual demonization, and cultural misrepresentation. The Crusades (11th–13th centuries) established a deeply embedded pattern: Christianity as the force of "civilization" and Islam as its foil. During this period, theological engagement was nearly nonexistent; polemic and war replaced dialogue and

understanding. These campaigns left not only physical devastation, but psychological and theological scars that persist to this day.

The rise of European colonial empires in Muslim-majority lands—from British domination in Iraq and Iran to French control of Lebanon and North Africa—further entrenched cultural superiority complexes. Islamic thought was often dismissed as stagnant or derivative, while Christian missionaries assumed the role of moral and spiritual correctives. Under these conditions, mutual comprehension was structurally discouraged. And within the Muslim world itself, the split between Sunni and Shi'a Islam—hardened by events like the Safavid-Ottoman conflict and the persecution of Shi'as under Sunni regimes—further complicated any consistent engagement between Christian and Shi'a intellectual traditions. For most of Western history, Shi'ism was a theological black box, treated as an obscure sect rather than a comprehensive moral worldview.

4.2. Epistemic Silos: Orientalism, Western Theological Parochialism

The modern West inherited a deep epistemic bias through what Edward Said called *Orientalism*: the intellectual tendency to study the East not on its own terms, but as a distorted mirror of the West. In this framework, Islam was rarely seen as a complex theological tradition. It was viewed instead as culturally stagnant, politically irrational, and spiritually inferior. Even academic disciplines that studied Islam—such as Islamic studies, area studies, or political science—tended to separate theology from politics, leaving moral frameworks unexplored or misunderstood.

At the same time, Western Christian theology became increasingly parochial. As Protestantism developed, and especially in its American forms, it turned inward—focusing on denominational disputes, personal salvation, and local moral issues. Engagement with other traditions was often framed either in missionary terms (convert the Muslim) or political terms (contain or confront Islam). Even Catholic and Orthodox scholars who might have shared structural similarities with Shi'a ritual and theology often neglected serious study of Shi'ism.

This double epistemic narrowing—Islam viewed through political utility, and Christianity turned toward intramural concerns—has left very few bridges of deep understanding. Most people who study one tradition do so without intellectual sympathy or moral curiosity about the other.

4.3. Sunni-Normativity and Shi'a Invisibility

Even within the Islamic world, Shi'a Islam is frequently marginalized or misunderstood, including by Western scholars who mistakenly conflate Islam with Sunni majority practices and jurisprudence. Because Sunni Islam accounts for approximately 85–90% of the Muslim population globally, many scholars, policymakers, and journalists treat it as representative of Islam as a whole.

This "Sunni-normativity" has rendered Shi'a moral theology nearly invisible in both interfaith and political discourse. When Western leaders or analysts refer to "Islamic law" or "Islamic views on peace," they almost always draw on Sunni sources. Shi'a texts, institutions, and cosmologies are either omitted or misinterpreted—despite the fact that Shi'a Islam has played a central role in some of the most consequential events in modern geopolitics, from the Iranian Revolution to the Iraq War to the ongoing tensions in Lebanon and Yemen.

In this vacuum, Shi'a martyrdom is misread as nihilism, its rituals as superstition, and its political resistance as blind rage. Without understanding the deep roots of Shi'a spiritual and ethical frameworks, the West remains unequipped to grasp the moral force behind Shi'a movements and governance models.

4.4. Institutional Barriers: Education, Diplomacy, Policy

Beyond intellectual and historical failures lies a more immediate and systemic problem: institutional design. The structures through which religious and geopolitical knowledge is acquired—universities, seminaries, foreign service academies, think tanks, military colleges—are overwhelmingly shaped by siloed epistemologies. Theology is taught separately from political science. Islam is studied separately from Christianity. Ethics is isolated from strategy.

In religious seminaries, particularly in the Christian West, comparative theology is a rarity, and when it exists, it tends to focus on broad Abrahamic commonalities

rather than real doctrinal divergences. In international affairs training, religion is often treated as a secondary variable, something to be managed rather than deeply understood. Few diplomats, intelligence analysts, or political advisors receive any formal training in the internal logics of Shi'a Islam or Christian theology—let alone both.

This institutional failure results in a leadership class that lacks the vocabulary to engage religious actors on their own terms. Political decisions are made without understanding the sacred narratives that drive behavior. Peace negotiations ignore moral symbols. Military interventions inflame rather than resolve, precisely because they trample on unseen theological ground.

In sum, the inability of global leaders to understand both Shi'a and Christian moral traditions is not merely an oversight—it is the outcome of centuries of estrangement, intellectual myopia, structural bias, and institutional neglect. Bridging this gap is not only a matter of academic curiosity; it is a precondition for peace, diplomacy, and moral clarity in a world where religion remains a potent force in public life.

5. Those Who Bridged the Divide

Though rare, there have been remarkable individuals who managed to genuinely understand and engage both Shi'a Islamic and Christian moral frameworks, not through superficial comparison or political necessity, but through serious intellectual, spiritual, and theological immersion. These figures did not approach the traditions as distant observers or competitors; they sought to find the inner logic, metaphysical architecture, and moral urgency within each tradition—often at great personal cost or against the tide of their academic or religious peers. In a world of institutional silos and historical suspicion, their work stands as a model for what true interreligious comprehension can look like.

5.1. Henry Corbin and Shi'a Visionary Philosophy

Henry Corbin (1903–1978), a French philosopher and orientalist, was perhaps the most significant Western thinker to engage Shi'a Islam from within, particularly its mystical and esoteric dimensions. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Corbin did not reduce Islam to sociology or jurisprudence. Instead, he approached Shi'ism—especially the thought of Ibn 'Arabi, Suhrawardi, and the Twelver Imams—as a philosophy of presence, deeply comparable to the Christian mystical tradition.

Corbin coined the term "imaginal realm" (mundus imaginalis) to describe the intermediate world of archetypes and divine forms that he found in both Shi'a gnosis and Christian visionary literature. For Corbin, Shi'a Islam was not an exotic offshoot of Sunni orthodoxy but a parallel theological cosmos, rich with spiritual depth and committed to a cosmic struggle for justice.

He insisted that Shi'ism's emphasis on the Hidden Imam, divinely guided resistance, and the redemptive role of suffering echoed some of Christianity's most profound metaphysical insights, particularly those found in Christian esotericism and post-Byzantine theology. Corbin's work was not about syncretism—it was about resonance without erasure, drawing from both traditions while honoring their distinctiveness.

5.2. Louis Massignon's Respectful Christian-Islamic Dialogue

Louis Massignon (1883–1962) was a Catholic scholar of Islam whose profound respect for Muslim spirituality—particularly that of Sufism and Shi'ism—marked a turning point in interfaith engagement. Massignon's early research on the mystic al-Hallaj, who was executed for proclaiming the ecstatic unity of God and self, led him to a lifetime of study on the spiritual interiority of Islam.

What set Massignon apart was not just academic rigor but empathy and moral courage. He often described Islam not as an object of study but as a theological conversation partner—a bearer of truth, however differently formulated. He developed what he called the "Abrahamic hospitality" model: an ethical commitment to mutual reverence among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, rooted in shared descent from Abraham.

Massignon was one of the first Christian thinkers to speak with reverence about Shi'a martyrdom and mystical sacrifice, recognizing in it an echo of Christian conceptions of redemptive suffering. His public opposition to colonial injustice, especially in Algeria, gave weight to his theology: it was not theory but an act of moral solidarity.

5.3. Ayatollah Motahhari's Dialogue with Christian Ethics

On the other side of the divide stood Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari (1919–1979), an Iranian cleric, philosopher, and martyr of the Islamic Revolution. A disciple of Ayatollah Khomeini and a key ideologue of post-revolutionary Iran, Motahhari was not only a theologian of Islamic law and Shi'a identity—he was also deeply invested in dialogue with Western moral and philosophical thought, including Christian ethics.

Motahhari believed that Islam and Christianity shared deep concerns about justice, spiritual freedom, and the dignity of man, and he studied Western Christian philosophers like Kierkegaard, Pascal, and Aquinas. He saw in Christian moral thought a valuable counterpoint to secular materialism and a potential ally in resisting Western imperialism and ethical collapse.

But Motahhari's engagement was not uncritical. He contrasted Shi'a resistance theology with what he viewed as Christian passivity, arguing that martyrdom in Islam is active, political, and justice-oriented—whereas Christian martyrdom, as he understood it, was often individual and mystical. Yet he always argued from within a respectful philosophical frame, seeking truth across boundaries rather than defending one side at the expense of the other.

His assassination in 1979 by a radical group underscored the fragility of such bridges—even within the very movement he helped build.

5.4. Mystical Intersections: Interfaith Gnosis

Beyond academic and political figures, there have been mystics and spiritual seekers—often anonymous, sometimes heretical—who have intuited deep resonances between Christian and Shi'a gnosis. These figures may not have written systematic treatises, but their visions, poetry, and lives hint at a shared

mystical topology: the belief that truth is veiled, that suffering refines the soul, and that the divine is both immanent and transcendent.

In the Christian tradition, figures like St. John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, and Julian of Norwich articulated a vision of spiritual darkness, divine love, and transformative suffering that echoes the Shi'a themes of occultation, trial, and awaited justice. In Shi'a Islam, the Ziyarat texts and the sayings of the Imams often carry the same emotional and metaphysical weight as Christian confessional literature—longing for union with God, lamenting divine silence, trusting in eventual restoration.

These intersections are not accidents. They are signs that beneath doctrinal boundaries lie shared intuitions about the human condition, the nature of the sacred, and the meaning of suffering. Though few have had the language or institutional support to formalize this gnosis, their presence haunts the margins of both traditions like a forgotten ecumenism of the soul.

Together, these figures represent rare but vital voices—proof that it is possible to honor the distinctiveness of one's own faith while entering deeply into another's. They serve as models for what might yet be possible: not theological fusion, but mutual comprehension grounded in moral seriousness. Their work is more than historical footnote—it is a challenge to our present moment, asking whether we will choose ignorance or the more demanding path of understanding.

6. Those Who Should Have Known—but Didn't

The failure to understand both Shi'a Islamic and Christian moral frameworks is not only academic—it has repeatedly shaped the course of history through policy errors, missed opportunities, and catastrophically misread motivations. This failure is especially consequential when committed by individuals in positions of global influence. Many of these leaders had access to the intellectual tools and cultural exposure necessary to grasp the theological stakes behind events. And yet, through arrogance, pragmatism, or sheer indifference, they operated as

though religious moral frameworks were either irrelevant or obsolete. The result was not secular clarity—it was strategic blindness.

This section explores key historical moments when leaders and institutions should have known better, but instead chose to act in ways that revealed deep theological ignorance—ignorance that had real-world consequences measured in war, blood, and lost trust.

6.1. Carter and Reagan in 1979–1980

When the Iranian Revolution swept through the country in 1979, President Jimmy Carter and his administration viewed it largely through the lenses of Cold War containment and energy security. The collapse of the Shah's regime and the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini were interpreted not as the culmination of centuries of Shi'a resistance theology, but as an irrational populist uprising. Carter, a deeply religious Christian and a self-professed student of ethics, missed the opportunity to recognize in the Iranian Revolution a powerful moral narrative grounded in sacred justice, anti-imperial dignity, and historical martyrdom.

The ensuing hostage crisis only deepened the theological divide. The U.S. saw it as an affront to international law; the revolutionaries saw it as a divine rebuke to centuries of Western meddling. By failing to frame the revolution within Shi'a categories of justice, grievance, and redemption, Carter's administration stumbled into a confrontation it was neither morally nor diplomatically prepared to manage.

Ronald Reagan, who followed Carter, inherited the crisis and continued the pattern of theological blindness. His administration's covert arming of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, and the Iran-Contra scandal, only reinforced the Shi'a perception that the U.S. was aligned with oppressors and untrustworthy in principle. Both Carter and Reagan had the moral language of Christianity at their disposal—but neither employed it to understand or engage the Islamic moral universe rising before them.

6.2. Western Diplomats Shaping the Middle East

From Sykes-Picot to the Balfour Declaration, Western diplomats have redrawn the Middle East with profound disregard for its religious moral landscapes. The

borders imposed after World War I and solidified through mid-century colonialism often ignored the complex interplay of Sunni, Shi'a, Christian, and tribal identities, treating the region as a chessboard rather than a sacred terrain.

Even in more recent decades, diplomats have operated on the assumption that religion is secondary to economic or security interests. Attempts to broker peace—whether in Lebanon, Syria, or Iraq—have often relied on Sunni-dominant frameworks or secular constitutional models, failing to address the Shi'a conception of legitimate authority, justice, and resistance. The result has been fragmented governance, civil wars, and lost opportunities to build alliances based on mutual moral values.

These failures are not due to lack of intelligence but lack of theological and cultural humility. Diplomats who are fluent in law, finance, and military history are often illiterate in the sacred languages that shape people's lives and deaths.

6.3. Post-9/11 Security Establishment

After the September 11 attacks, the United States and its allies launched a global "War on Terror" that would reshape the Muslim world for decades. Yet within this massive mobilization of military, intelligence, and diplomatic power, there was little serious engagement with Islamic theology—let alone the internal distinctions between Sunni and Shi'a moral universes.

The U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003 revealed this ignorance in dramatic fashion. Planners seemed unaware that Saddam Hussein had violently suppressed Shi'a populations, and that the fall of his regime would unleash a Shi'a resurgence with theological and political dimensions. In failing to anticipate the symbolic return of Karbala politics, the U.S. misread almost every move of the post-invasion resistance. When Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army mobilized, many in Washington dismissed them as mere "radicals" rather than understanding their actions as an extension of Shi'a sacred memory and moral obligation.

Even the targeting of clerical figures and the desecration of holy sites—whether through negligence or misunderstanding—amplified anti-American sentiment not simply as political grievance, but as theological desecration. Had the architects of

the post-9/11 security apparatus understood Shi'a theology, they might have designed strategies based on moral recognition, rather than brute force.

6.4. UN Actors During the Iraq–Iran War

Between 1980 and 1988, the Iran–Iraq War raged with unimaginable brutality, fueled in part by Western support for Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime. The United Nations, tasked with mediating the conflict and upholding international norms, consistently failed to address the asymmetry of moral worldviews between the two sides. While Iraq framed the war as territorial and ideological, Iran consistently portrayed it as a sacred defense—a battle of justice versus tyranny, informed by Shi'a theology and legitimized through martyrdom.

The UN's refusal to condemn Iraq's use of chemical weapons, or to engage Iran's religious framing of the war with seriousness, was seen in Qom and Tehran as confirmation of Western complicity in the oppression of the faithful. Rather than act as a mediator between two moral visions, the UN became a bureaucratic echo chamber for power politics—failing to offer Iran any framework of engagement that acknowledged its theological and ethical narrative.

In the end, the war killed hundreds of thousands, entrenched Shi'a distrust of international institutions, and emboldened Iran's sense of divine isolation. These were not just political costs—they were theological damages that continue to shape Iranian identity and posture today.

6.5. Contemporary Missed Alliances (e.g., Yemen Christians)

In the present moment, missed opportunities for alliance-building persist, particularly in regions where minority Christians and Shi'a Muslims face common threats. In Yemen, for instance, the Zaydi Shi'a Houthi movement has long positioned itself against both Saudi Wahhabism and Western imperialism. Despite ideological and strategic differences, local Christian communities—especially in the highlands—have shared cultural roots and often similar experiences of marginalization.

Yet there has been no serious effort by Western Christian leaders or governments to cultivate moral solidarity with these communities. Instead, policy has defaulted

to Sunni-majority partnerships (e.g., Saudi Arabia), leaving both Shi'a groups and local Christians further alienated. This neglect is not only a moral failure; it is a geostrategic miscalculation, for it undermines the very alliances that could offer alternatives to extremism and sectarian fragmentation.

Similarly, in Iraq and Syria, Christian minorities and Shi'a militias have occasionally found themselves co-defending towns against ISIS, yet these moments of cooperation have been overlooked by Western observers, who remain locked in simplistic binaries of Sunni vs. Shi'a or secular vs. religious.

The failure to recognize interfaith potential in places of shared persecution stems from a lack of moral imagination—a failure to see beyond familiar narratives and into the sacred landscapes that connect unlikely allies.

Each of these failures points to a broader crisis: a global leadership class that lacks the theological vocabulary and moral empathy to navigate a world where religion still defines loyalty, legitimacy, and resistance. Those who should have known—by virtue of position, education, or moral responsibility—chose expediency over understanding, and the world is still living with the consequences.

7. Case Study: Trump's 2025 Iran Nuclear Strikes

In June 2025, the Trump administration executed a series of high-impact airstrikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, dubbed "Operation Midnight Hammer." The strikes marked a critical escalation in U.S.–Iran relations and ignited international concern over the collapse of nuclear diplomacy, regional instability, and the further erosion of trust between the Islamic world and the West. More than a geopolitical incident, these strikes also revealed a deeper religious illiteracy—a complete failure to engage or even recognize the theological frameworks that shape Iranian identity, particularly within its Shi'a moral paradigm.

This case illustrates precisely the kind of strategic and ethical blindness that arises when policy decisions are made without theological comprehension, and when

religious language is weaponized not to illuminate moral complexity but to sanctify force.

7.1. Chronology: “Operation Midnight Hammer” (June 22, 2025)

In the early hours of June 22, 2025, under the direct command of President Donald Trump—who had returned to office in the 2024 election—the United States launched coordinated strikes on three major Iranian nuclear facilities: Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan. U.S. military sources claimed the operation was swift and surgical, using bunker-penetrating munitions and long-range drones to “neutralize” what they alleged were imminent weaponization capabilities.

Initial satellite images showed extensive structural damage, and by midday the Iranian Foreign Ministry issued a statement declaring the strikes as acts of war, resulting in “serious and heavy” infrastructural loss. Though casualty numbers remained unclear, Iranian officials framed the assault not only as a violation of sovereignty but as an affront to Islamic dignity, invoking imagery from Karbala to describe their national resilience.

In the days that followed, global media and think tanks debated whether the strikes had set back Iran’s nuclear capabilities or merely galvanized their acceleration under a banner of sacred resistance. Diplomats warned that any chance of reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was now effectively dead. Some even argued that the attack destabilized the Non-Proliferation Treaty framework, potentially setting a precedent for preemptive force as a substitute for diplomacy.

7.2. Religious Illiteracy at Work

The decision-making that led to Operation Midnight Hammer was entirely devoid of theological consciousness, particularly regarding Shi’a Islam’s moral universe. No public statement or leaked transcript from the Trump cabinet suggested any consideration of how Shi’a communities perceive martyrdom, resistance, or divine justice. There was no indication that U.S. officials understood that Iranian leaders would not interpret the strikes as mere acts of war—but as cosmic confirmation of their historical narrative: the oppression of the righteous by global Yazids.

Even from the Christian side, there was no theological grounding. The Christian ethic of peace, humility, or even just war was conspicuously absent. Instead, the rationale offered by Trump and his supporters was geopolitical theater, fused with apocalyptic nationalism. Many evangelical leaders cited biblical prophecy—referencing Israel's divine protection and framing Iran as part of a Gog–Magog axis of evil. In this worldview, support for Israel became a theological trump card, absolving the need for any nuanced engagement with Christian or Shi'a moral teachings.

The resulting discourse was neither Shi'a nor Christian, but a strategically hollow invocation of God-language, where religion served as a rallying cry, not a source of ethical deliberation.

7.3. Political Theology: "God Bless Israel" Without Moral Clarity

President Trump's speeches surrounding the strikes consistently included references to divine favor, most notably ending one address with "God bless Israel, God bless America." But this invocation of the divine carried no corresponding moral weight. It did not consider Christ's teachings on peace, nor did it reflect any awareness of Shi'a doctrines concerning justice, resistance, or sacred law.

The political theology on display was instrumentalized—a performative religiosity designed to legitimize violence rather than guide conscience. While Iran's response was steeped in the rhetoric of Karbala, martyrdom, and divine justice, the American message was more akin to civilizational exceptionalism, fused with millenarian undertones. In this schema, Israel functioned not as a state among others but as a divine actor, and American foreign policy became a tool for prophetic fulfillment, not ethical negotiation.

Such a theological void, masked by piety, is particularly dangerous: it absolves leaders of moral responsibility while making resistance seem irrational or sacrilegious in the eyes of the American public.

7.4. Consequences: Escalation Rather Than Peace

In the immediate aftermath, Iran's leadership vowed accelerated nuclear development, citing the attack as proof that diplomacy with the West is futile. The strikes validated hardline clerics who had long warned against trusting the U.S., and elevated martyrdom rhetoric across Shi'a communities—not only in Iran but in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. The message was clear: the oppressors have struck again, and the faithful must resist.

Internationally, the strike undermined global non-proliferation efforts. Neutral states questioned whether international law was still respected, and whether the precedent of unilateral action might lead others—India, Pakistan, North Korea—to act similarly.

Domestically, the strikes further polarized American politics. Evangelical leaders praised the action as "defending God's people," while progressive Christians and interfaith advocates condemned the decision as a theologically illiterate provocation that endangered global stability and the Christian witness.

In Shi'a seminaries from Qom to Najaf, students studied Trump's rhetoric not as diplomacy, but as a modern Yazidism—arrogant, unjust, and divinely doomed. By failing to understand the moral world of their adversary, the Trump administration did not weaken Shi'a resolve—it strengthened its narrative of cosmic resistance.

The 2025 Iran strikes reveal more than a strategic failure—they expose the danger of theological ignorance in geopolitical affairs. When religion is invoked as slogan rather than scripture, and when decisions that affect millions are made without regard for the moral structures of either faith, the result is not peace—it is escalation, alienation, and the erosion of meaning itself.

8. Consequences of Theological Illiteracy

The inability—or refusal—to understand the theological frameworks that underpin moral reasoning in both Shi'a Islam and Christianity has not remained a

theoretical deficit; it has yielded real-world consequences that have shaped diplomacy, war, national narratives, and international perceptions. At the heart of these failures is a widespread theological illiteracy among political leaders, diplomats, journalists, military planners, and even many religious figures. When moral frameworks are misunderstood or ignored, policy decisions become not just ineffective but actively dangerous, misreading intentions, inflaming conflicts, and eroding opportunities for peace.

These failures do not result from a lack of intelligence, but from a lack of moral imagination—a deficit in the capacity to see others as morally serious actors acting within coherent theological traditions. The result is a world increasingly shaped by fear, misinterpretation, and failed negotiation, all rooted in fundamental misunderstandings of what motivates resistance, submission, law, justice, and peace.

8.1. Mischaracterizing Resistance as Fanaticism

When Shi'a Muslims resist foreign domination or domestic tyranny, they often do so within a theological framework that views resistance not merely as a political act, but as a sacred duty. To outsiders unfamiliar with this tradition—especially in the West—such resistance is frequently labeled as fanaticism, "radicalism," or "Islamism." These labels function as ideological dismissals, reducing complex theological motivations to irrational outbursts or nihilistic violence.

This failure to recognize moral intentionality behind Shi'a resistance distorts policy. It encourages leaders to believe that adversaries are impervious to reason, uninterested in diplomacy, and motivated solely by hatred—when in fact, many are driven by deeply coherent doctrines of divine justice, honor, and sacrifice. Martyrdom, for example, is not about death for death's sake—it is about giving one's life in fidelity to divine principles, in continuity with the example of Imam Hussain.

When these theological underpinnings are ignored, efforts at containment, deterrence, or even negotiation fall flat. Worse, military action taken without moral comprehension often strengthens the theological resolve of the very groups

it seeks to suppress, confirming their sense of spiritual legitimacy and historical continuity.

8.2. Equating Submission with National or Religious Weakness

Conversely, in the Christian moral tradition—especially as exemplified in the Gospels—submission, humility, and even suffering are not signs of weakness but of strength. Christ's crucifixion is not a defeat but a victory through love. However, when this theological perspective is not understood by secular or militarized powers, it too is dismissed—this time not as fanaticism, but as passivity or "turning the other cheek" in a pejorative sense.

Nations or movements influenced by Christian ethics that refrain from retaliation or adopt positions of moral restraint are often seen as lacking willpower or resolve. In military and geopolitical circles, this can lead to underestimating their long-term strategic consistency or moral staying power. Such groups may be marginalized in peace negotiations or excluded from leadership roles in coalitions because their moral orientation does not conform to the dominant logic of power and deterrence.

The irony is that both Shi'a resistance and Christian submission are misunderstood as forms of irrationality—one for being too aggressive, the other for being too soft. In both cases, the theology that gives moral coherence to these positions is simply erased, leaving behind caricatures that distort both motivation and intention.

8.3. Undermining Diplomacy by Ignoring Theological Motivations

Diplomatic engagements too often operate as if religion were incidental—an optional element in cultural protocol rather than a primary driver of worldviews. When diplomats fail to understand the theological commitments of their interlocutors, they craft strategies based on material interests alone, offering incentives or threats that miss the deeper stakes involved.

In the case of Shi'a Iran, for example, negotiations over nuclear development cannot be separated from Iran's self-understanding as a theologically guided resistance state, committed to justice in a world perceived as dominated by

imperial arrogance. Appeals to "international norms" or "economic benefits" may fall flat if they are seen as morally hollow or politically manipulative.

Likewise, attempts to engage Christian-majority nations—or Christian-inspired resistance movements—often fail when religious conscience is treated as negotiable, or when moral commitments are subordinated to short-term gains. The result is a diplomacy that fails to resonate, and is therefore unsustainable.

The absence of theological understanding in diplomacy leads to missed signals, mistranslated language, and misaligned priorities. Without a grasp of the sacred, secular negotiation becomes incoherent to those for whom the sacred defines reality.

8.4. Worsening Global Instability and Mistrust

At a macro level, the cumulative effect of theological illiteracy is deepening global mistrust and instability. When people of faith—be they Muslim or Christian—see their deepest beliefs misunderstood, ignored, or weaponized, they lose faith not only in political systems but in the possibility of dialogue itself.

For Shi'a communities, Western military interventions—unmoored from any understanding of Karbala, martyrdom, or sacred law—appear as acts of sheer domination, disconnected from any coherent moral vision. For Christians in the West, watching their own theological vocabulary (e.g., grace, peace, sacrifice) co-opted into nationalistic or militaristic rhetoric undermines their faith's credibility and moral power.

This erosion of trust is not limited to governments. It spreads to interfaith initiatives, educational exchanges, and even humanitarian work, all of which become suspect when wrapped in the cloak of political expediency. When moral language is emptied of content, it becomes a tool of control rather than a bridge of understanding.

The result is a world in which cynicism replaces conviction, strategic suspicion replaces goodwill, and conflict becomes self-fulfilling—not because of theological difference, but because of the refusal to engage theological difference seriously.

Theological illiteracy is not a neutral deficiency—it is a strategic liability and a moral failure. In an age where religion remains one of the most powerful forces shaping human action, leaders who fail to understand its moral logics will not only make poor decisions—they will make dangerous ones. If peace is to be more than a pause between wars, it must be grounded in mutual comprehension of what each side holds sacred.

9. Toward Moral and Theological Literacy in Leadership

The previous sections have shown, in sobering detail, the global consequences of theological illiteracy. Yet this condition is not inevitable. It is the result of choices—curricular, cultural, institutional, and personal. If leaders are not equipped to understand the moral frameworks that drive billions of people, it is because we have not demanded that they be. Changing this begins with a redefinition of what we consider "strategic intelligence" and "leadership competence." A morally literate leader must be more than a manager of interests; they must be an interpreter of values—someone who can cross conceptual and theological boundaries with respect and precision.

This is not about turning states into theocracies or replacing policy with piety. It is about recognizing that theological reasoning continues to animate resistance movements, social orders, visions of justice, and even the very idea of peace. To ignore that is not neutrality—it is blindness. Rebuilding trust and stability in a fractured world requires a leadership class trained not just in law or economics, but in the moral vocabularies that guide civilization.

9.1. Cross-Disciplinary Religious Studies in Foreign Policy Schools

One of the most urgent reforms must take place in schools of international relations, political science, and national security, where future diplomats and policymakers are trained. These institutions often regard theology as an optional or antiquated subject, assigning it to the humanities or, worse, dismissing it altogether as incompatible with "hard" policy disciplines.

This must change. Religious studies, moral philosophy, and comparative theology should be required components of global affairs education. But not as abstract theory—rather, as practical tools for understanding the motivations of real actors on the world stage. A policymaker negotiating with Iran should understand Shi'a concepts of *adl* (justice), *imamate* (divinely guided leadership), and *shahada* (martyrdom). A diplomat posted in Lebanon should know the difference between Sunni jurisprudence and Shi'a esotericism. A negotiator in Jerusalem must be conversant in both Zionist theology and Palestinian Christian liberation ethics.

These are not exotic curiosities. They are essential to interpreting why people act the way they do, how they view legitimacy, and what constitutes moral victory or defeat. Without that interpretive skill, diplomacy becomes guesswork and security policy becomes provocation.

9.2. Embedding Moral Theology in Diplomatic Training

Beyond the classroom, diplomatic corps and foreign service programs must incorporate moral theology into their ongoing training and professional development. It is not enough to learn about cultural customs or religious holidays. Diplomats must be trained to understand and engage theological arguments—especially when they form the backbone of national identity or resistance ideology.

This means introducing diplomats to the internal debates within Islam and Christianity: between legalism and mysticism, between quietism and activism, between grace and justice. It means learning to listen not just to the words of religious leaders, but to the sacred texts and stories that give those words their force. Diplomats should be able to recognize when a statement echoes the Qur'an, the Sermon on the Mount, the Ziyarat Ashura, or the writings of Augustine.

Such literacy builds credibility. A diplomat who can cite both Christ's command to love enemies and Imam Hussain's refusal to bow to tyranny will be better equipped to mediate, to de-escalate, and—most importantly—to be trusted. When the sacred is taken seriously, relationships change.

9.3. Cultivating Spiritually Literate Leaders of Peace

Beyond technical competence, the world needs leaders who are spiritually literate—not necessarily devout, but attuned to the sacred concerns of others. These are individuals who can inhabit the worldview of another tradition without condescension or fear. They understand that peace is not a transactional outcome but a moral posture, one that requires empathy, memory, and reverence.

Such leaders may emerge from politics, religion, academia, or civil society. What unites them is a commitment to moral complexity. They do not flatten resistance into fanaticism, or submission into cowardice. They do not pit Shi'a against Sunni, or Christian against Muslim, without understanding the deep moral logic of each tradition. They do not invoke God to bless their wars while ignoring the theological convictions of those they bomb.

These leaders do not simply tolerate religion—they dialogue with it, learn from it, and hold themselves accountable to it, even when they govern in secular states. They recognize that to lead in a religiously diverse world, one must have the intellectual courage and spiritual humility to engage moral worldviews not their own.

9.4. Reorienting Leadership Toward Genuine Comprehension, Not Convenience

Too often, leaders invoke religion only when it is convenient—when it serves as a rallying cry, a source of legitimacy, or a shield for otherwise indefensible policies. This instrumentalization of the sacred is both morally corrosive and strategically disastrous. It cheapens faith, alienates genuine believers, and replaces theological depth with rhetorical spectacle.

The path forward demands a new orientation: leadership grounded in comprehension, not manipulation. This means asking hard questions: What do Shi'a Muslims mean when they speak of dignity through suffering? What do Christians mean when they call the cross a victory? What is the difference between divine law and legalism, between redemptive violence and sacrificial love?

These are not theological luxuries. They are the moral grammar of the 21st century. Without fluency in them, leaders cannot read the world accurately—let alone lead it wisely.

To build a just and peaceful global order, we must train leaders who can see theology not as obstacle, but as compass—a guide to the deepest aspirations, fears, and commitments of human civilization. The era of theological ignorance has cost us dearly. The era of moral literacy, if we choose it, could redeem far more than we imagine.

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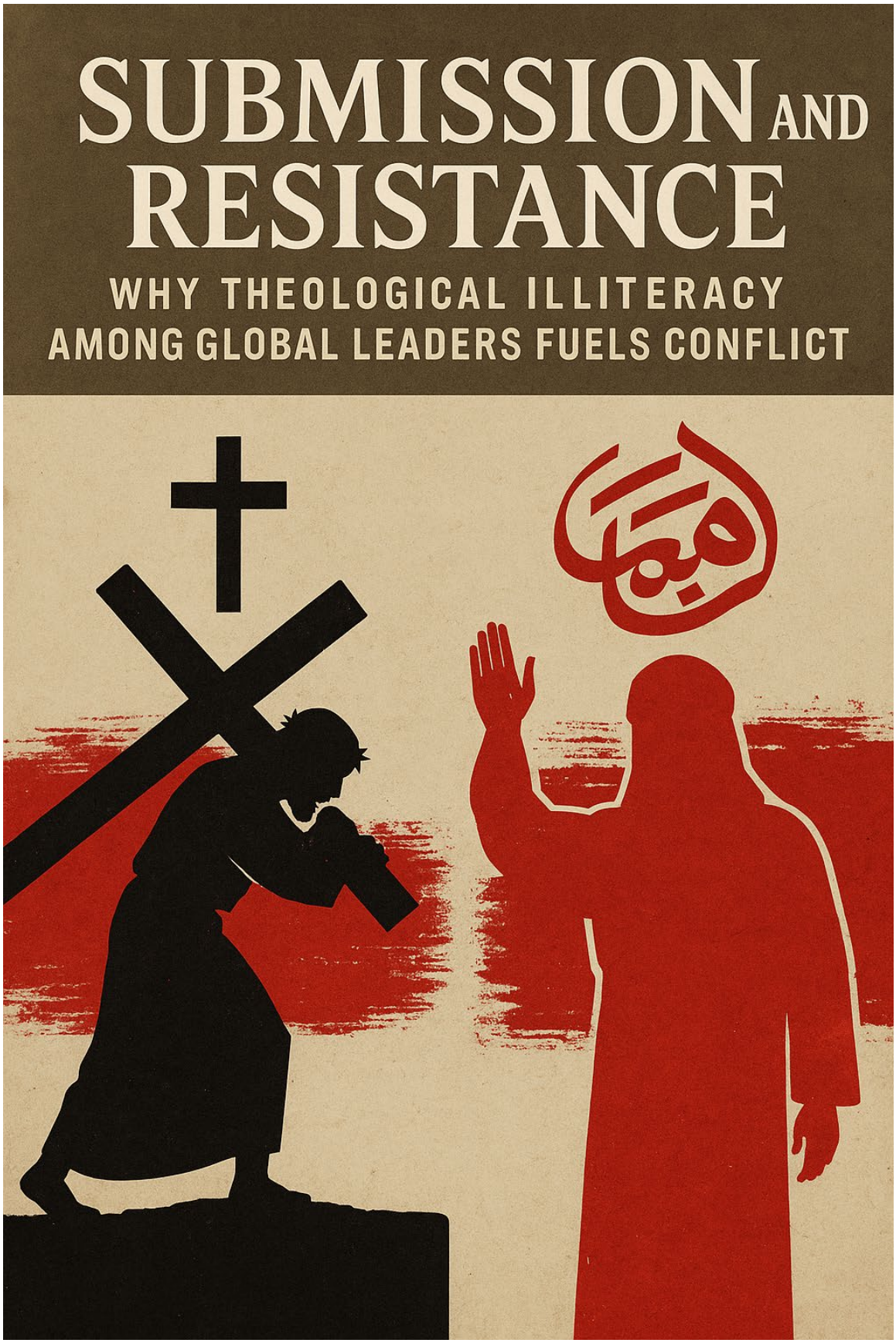
SUBMISSION AND RESISTANCE
WHY THEOLOGICAL ILLITERACY AMONG GLOBAL LEADERS FUELS CONFLICT